

Wednesday, March 17, 2010

## ***Council takes heat over 'Science City'***

### **Elrich wants to send plans back to Planning Board**

by Patricia M. Murret | Staff Writer

Less than 24 hours after Gaithersburg and Rockville passed resolutions calling for revisions to plans for an 800-acre "Science City," hundreds of residents put pressure on the at-large members of the Montgomery County Council to make significant changes to the scope of the project.

A majority of the residents arrived frustrated at last week's meeting, where the council members, who are all up for election in the fall, heard their concerns about traffic, density and other issues. Still others urged the council to take quick action so the multidecade vision — which will be outlined in the Gaithersburg West Master Plan — for the Life Sciences Center can move forward.

One councilman said he would be "thrilled" to return the blueprint to county planners before voting in May on whether to approve it.

"Sending it back to the Planning Board is not rejecting it," said County Councilman Marc Elrich (D) of Takoma Park, who called for a traffic analysis and input from municipalities and residents before plans for the biotechnology research complex go forward. Residents have been commenting in town hall meetings since the start, but Elrich said their input has not been fairly considered and municipalities have not had a chance to give structured guidance.

"None of us is saying that nothing should happen here. I think that everybody agrees that this is the Life Sciences Center and we want it to thrive. But you can't do it by pretending that the community doesn't exist," he said.

Elrich has called for a new traffic study, saying that the measures county planners used are "cooked."

Elrich, County Council President Nancy M. Floreen (D) of Garrett Park, County Councilwoman Duchy Trachtenberg (D) of Bethesda and County Councilman George Leventhal (D) of Takoma Park heard residents' views March 9 at Quince Orchard High School in Gaithersburg. The North Potomac Citizens' Association, which has voiced strong opposition to plans, organized the meeting.

Today's Life Sciences Center includes the Universities at Shady Grove and the Johns Hopkins University— Montgomery County Campus, as well as hundreds of biotechnology companies. The vision calls for transforming the 6.9 million-square-foot,

suburban-style research park into a 20 million-square-foot research center with retail and housing.

Signs around the school's cafeteria said that at that size, the complex will be 4.4 times larger than the Pentagon. Residents continued raising concerns about traffic and density.

"What I want you to know is that we want you to be engaged. We've been listening," Floreen said.

Diana Conway of North Potomac, who spoke on behalf of Montgomery Countryside Alliance and West Montgomery Citizens' Association, asked for plans to be scaled back. She challenged Floreen and Leventhal, who ran for office in 2002 on a slate called "End Gridlock."

"I ask you honestly to help me understand this apparent irony, because there are a number of folks who do not understand how these two things co-exist," Conway said, referring to the vision and political promises.

"I'm not here to defend [the plans] one way or the other," Floreen said. "But what I will say to you is that I believe in building the infrastructure that you need."

Leventhal underscored the staging, or "sequencing" of the project, saying that development should go hand-in-hand with anticipated transportation projects, such as construction of the Corridor Cities Transitway, a long-discussed rapid transit route from the Shady Grove Metro station in Rockville to the Comsat building near Clarksburg.

Trachtenberg spoke of striking "a balance between the growth that we want versus the quality of life that we need," adding that communities need to be respected.

Some residents, including state Del. Saqib Ali (D-Dist. 39) of Gaithersburg, wore white stickers saying "send it back."

Kevin McGowan of North Potomac voiced support, however. The National Cancer Institute is moving its headquarters to the Shady Grove Life Sciences Center — and could bring groundbreaking discoveries, he said.

"It took us about 10 years to do the human genome, about 10 months to do SARS [the virus that causes severe acute respiratory syndrome] and about 10 hours to do H1N1 [a virus commonly known as swine flu]. That's how fast science is moving," the molecular biologist said. He said he enjoyed seeing democracy in process.